C553s
no.42

UNITARIAN BELIEF

I. RELIGION MADE FOR MAN, NOT MAN FOR RELIGION

BOSTON
GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET
1898

SERMONS

OF

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It is proposed to continue the publication, under this title, of pamphlets by Mr. Clarke, this being the first of a series on Unitarian Belief.

PRICE: Single copies 5 cents each, or three dollars per hundred.

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Religion made for Man, not Man for Religion.

"The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath."— MARK ii. 27, 28.

"But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple." MATTHEW xii. 6.

IN beginning a course of lectures on the working principles of the Unitarian belief, I will say at the outset this, that I have no controversial purpose. I do not wish to attack the beliefs of others, but only to state my own opinions, and those which I think are common to Unitarians generally. I have no quarrel with Orthodoxy. I have much respect for its earnestness, depth of conviction, and active devotion to the cause of Christ. If I am obliged to differ from any statements in the Orthodox creeds, I find myself, when I do so, in the company of many of the ablest and best men in all the creed-holding denominations.

In stating Unitarian beliefs, I shall endeavor to give the view held by the majority. No doubt there are extreme views in either direction. Every active and energetic body of thinkers has a right wing and a left wing; and we have ours. There are such in every religious denomination, every political party, every moral and philanthropic enterprise. There are some who are always pressing forward, and some who are always holding back.

There are those who revere the old words, old creeds, old ways of acting, and do not like to change. There are those, also, who say with Rob Roy, in Wordsworth's poem: —

> "Of old things, all are over old;
> Of new things, none are new enough.
> We'll show them we can help to frame
> A world of better stuff."

Men of these two extremes should keep together, see each other, give each other the impulse or restraint which each may need. I have noticed that our strong conservatives are apt to be those who were educated in the body, who grew up in it; while the eager reformers are those who have come to us from the stricter sects, and feel a little like boys let out of school. No doubt we need both restraint and impulse; and it is well that we have both.

In this first discourse, I propose to speak of a profound principle which makes a radical difference between religious thinkers. It is a principle which I believe lies at the root of the whole Unitarian movement, and is widely felt outside of our own body. It has never been formulated as an article of belief by ourselves or by others. Still, it is a working principle of most of those who are called Liberal Christians.

If we ask the question, "What is religion for?" two answers, radically opposite, may be given. One says that religion is for the sake of man; the other, that man is for the sake of religion.

According to the second view, God has, for inscrutable reasons and purposes of his own, commanded certain duties, established laws, required belief. Religion con-

sists in doing all we can to please God. He is our master: we are to obey him without asking why. He teaches us infallible doctrines through the infallible Church or the infallible Bible; and we are to accept them, whether they seem reasonable or not.

According to the old doctrine of the divine right of kings, the legitimate ruler was to be obeyed, whether he was a good king or a bad one. The duty of the subject was passive obedience. The people were for the sake of the king, not the king for the sake of the people.

This view came necessarily from the old view concerning God. God was an absolute sovereign, whose reason was not like ours, whose justice was not our justice, whose law was to be obeyed, whether it seemed right or wrong, without any attempt to understand it. In like manner the king, who was God's vicegerent, was to be obeyed in the same unquestioning way. It was, doubtless, desirable that he should rule wisely and well; but, no matter how badly he ruled, he was to be obeyed.

The Westminster Assembly's Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" and replies, "To glorify God, and enjoy him forever." In a certain sense this is profoundly true. Jesus said, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." To do good and be good glorifies God; and this *is* the chief end of man. But, as it has been often understood, God is glorified by being praised and extolled; by hearing long litanies and liturgies of adoring worship; by our blind belief in creeds; by human mortification and sacrifices. Thus religion is for the sake of God, not for the sake of man.

These two principles may be illustrated by the different attitude of a master to his slaves and a father to his chil-

dren. The slave-owner may be just, kind, gentle; he may do all he can to make his slaves comfortable. Still, the slaves are for his sake, for his use, his advantage, not he for theirs. They belong to him: he does not belong to them. But parents, if they are wise and good, consider themselves always as acting for the benefit of their children. They do not ask, What do *I* need? but, What do *they* need? The happiness and improvement of the child is the end: their powers and time and strength are the means. The good father and mother rejoice in sacrificing themselves for their children. They make their home where it is best for their children to live; they adapt their movements, their hours, their domestic arrangements, to the children's wants. If a man acts otherwise, and sacrifices his children's good to his own pleasure and profit, we call him "an unnatural parent." It seems only natural and right to good fathers and mothers that the children should be the end, and they the means.

"If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father in heaven give his Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" This argument of Jesus assumes that we can fairly reason from the conduct and spirit of a good parent to that of the heavenly Father. He will give us what is best for us.

The two passages which we have taken for our text illustrate still more strikingly this view, and show that Jesus deliberately taught that religion was made for man, and not man for religion.

Two of the most vital, essential, unalterable parts of the Jewish system in the time of Jesus were Sabbath-keeping and temple-worship. The most minute and exact rules were given for both. It was a sin to violate

these rules in the slightest degree. To gather sticks on the Sabbath was a capital crime. The temple and temple-worship were so holy that any Gentile who passed in beyond a certain wall must be put to death. The Sabbath and temple were masters, the Jew was their servant. It was not for him to reason why, but to obey; not to make reply, but to conform strictly to the rule. It was on this account that the Pharisees found fault with Jesus, and called him a Sabbath-breaker. He and his disciples walked in the fields on the Sabbath, and plucked ears of corn. He healed the sick on the Sabbath, and, in defending himself, laid down this large and noble principle, that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Man is the end, the Sabbath is the means. Man is the master, the Sabbath the servant. Therefore, to do good to man on the Sabbath is lawful and right.

Quite as important and to the same effect is his second argument in his defence. The priests themselves, said he, have to work on the Sabbath, carrying on the duties of the temple. Sabbath-keeping with them is subordinate to temple-worship. But there is something here greater than the temple; namely, the Son of man, the representative of human nature. Jesus was the ideal man, the type of humanity, the man of men. Therefore, as a man he was greater than the temple,—not as the Messiah; not as a divine being, but as a human being; a man pure and entire, in whom dwelt the fulness of humanity. He was above ritual, temple, Sabbath, altar. These are all for the sake of man; therefore are to be modified, moulded, and altered to suit his highest needs. Wherever man stands, there is one greater than the temple, the church, the altar, the shrine.

The Jewish Sabbath was established for the good of man. It is good for man to rest one day in seven. It is good for the hard working race of mortals to have this little interval of peace; this calm in the midst of the storm of action; this turning from things seen and temporal to those unseen and eternal. The rest of the Sabbath is one contribution which the Jewish nation has made to human civilization. The Jewish Sabbath is kept by only five or six millions; but the rest of one day in seven derived from it is kept by some three hundred million Christians, and by two hundred million Mohammedans, making nearly half of the human race. It is not retained and observed because it is in the Book of Exodus, but because it is in the Book of Human Nature. Nevertheless, coming at first as a servant, it became a master. Coming to help and comfort, it became a burden and a discomfort. Coming to free the soul from the chains of care, it put a new yoke on the conscience and heart. This yoke was taken off by Jesus.

This same profound principle applies to all religious institutions. All are servants, none masters. They come to help; and, when they cease to help, they must be changed or abolished. We put this question to every institution: What good does it do? Does it do any good? These questions are not to be answered hastily or carelessly, but after full examination and ample deliberation. The answer decides their fate.

The Church is made for man, not man for the Church. It came because it was needed; because it is the nature of men to unite to do any work or to gain any good; because there is strength in union, comfort in society, help in sympathy. Men come and go, but this institution

lasts. Into it each generation pours its best experience, its highest thought, its largest love; and these are preserved for the generations which are to arise. For centuries the Church did this work. It lifted up the poor, taught the ignorant, was a home of peace in the midst of wars, and preached to mankind a gospel of love. So it drew to it the grateful reverence of mankind. Then it became powerful, and abused its power. It claimed divine authority over the mind and conscience. Its priesthood assumed to be empowered by God to decide the condition of the soul, to forgive sin, to command obedience. Then the Reformation came to declare that the Church was made for man, not man for the Church; that the Church is the means, and the good of man the end. The Church is not for its own sake, but for the sake of mankind. It has no divine authority except its utility. The rock on which the Church is built is not Peter as vicar of Christ, as infallible pope, but Peter feeding the sheep, taking care of the lambs, and teaching that Jesus is the Christ, because full of God's grace and truth. Most Protestants see this, as regards the authority of the Church. They believe it divine because it is useful. But they do not always comprehend how deep this principle goes, or how many practical questions it may settle, just as it settled for Jesus what might or might not be done on the Sabbath.

Nor do Unitarians always understand the force, sweep, and wide appliance of this great principle. Man is greater than the temple, greater than the Sabbath, greater than ritual, sacrament, and all ordinances. These all will perish and pass away: the immortal soul, educated to trust in God, to generous love, to heavenly aspiration, to

communion with God and all holy spirits, will endure. Humanity is the end, religion the means.

When Jesus uttered this far-reaching principle, he did not argue or discuss the matter: with a divine perception, he instantly applied it to the case before him. He swept away in a moment the whole mass of rules, traditions, decisions, of the rabbis concerning the Sabbath. They had been discussing, with infinite labor and ingenuity, the question, What work is forbidden and what permitted on the Sabbath? How far may one go from his home? What may he take in his hand? Is it forbidden to kindle a fire? How many sticks may be put on it? May water be boiled on the Sabbath? and the like. Jesus, with a single sentence of practical wisdom, set aside all these questions. "Do anything on the Sabbath which makes for the good of humanity." That is the only rule.

Let us apply this principle to some other questions still in debate among ourselves. "Is the Bible fully and literally inspired, so that it is infallible throughout?" Orthodoxy has said, "Yes": Unitarianism from the beginning said, "No." There is no such claim in the Bible itself; and such a claim is inconsistent with the fact that there are errors and contradictions in the Bible. The theory of plenary inspiration rests on the assumption that man was made for religion, not religion for man; that religion is the master, and man the servant: consequently, that we need a master who speaks with perfect authority. The Catholics have their infallible church. Protestants, then, must have their infallible Bible. If the whole Bible is not assumed to be infallible, men will reject what does not suit them, and only believe what they like. This is the argument.

But the answer is that the Bible was sent us for our good, and only that part of it which does us good is our real Bible. We may have the words "Holy Bible" printed on the cover which contains the Book of Leviticus, the wars of the Jews, the despairing pessimism of Ecclesiastes; but that part of the book is not our Holy Bible. Only that which feeds the soul, which we can eat and drink and assimilate and make a part of our own life, is sacred scripture. It is a means and not an end, a help and a comfort. It was given, as the apostle says, for doctrine, comfort, reproof, and instruction in righteousness. Other races have had their scriptures, too, which have, no doubt, helped their souls. God forbid that we should deny that God has also sent some truth and help to the Hindus in their Vedas, and to the Mohammedans in their Koran. But why is it that the Jewish Bible has become the sacred scripture of all the European races? In spite of the dislike felt for the Jews, we have accepted from them their Scripture, and put it with our own. It is because, besides a great deal that is useless to us, it contains so much which gives strength and light to the soul. There is so much of divine life, of tenderness, of aspiration, of lofty moral power, that we have taken it for our ritual, and it has been made the teacher of the teachers of mankind. We have found it, next to the Christian Scripture, the best comfort in our sorrow, the best expression of our joy. It stands on this rock, and the gates of the grave shall not prevail against it. But it is not necessary on that account to accept the geology of Moses or the astronomy of Genesis, or to take as literal truth all the lovely little poems which sprang up so naturally in a childlike and simple age. The Bible was made for man,

not man for the Bible. The Son of man is Lord also of the Bible. Whatever has his spirit in it, the spirit of the sermon on the mount, the parable of the prodigal son, and that of the good Samaritan, belongs to us all. Whatever does not partake of that spirit is no part of our Bible.

Prayer, also, is a means, and not an end. To pray so many times a day as a duty is not Christian prayer. Prayer is a heavenly means for heavenly ends. It is not sent to give us outward advantages, but to fill the soul with life. We never expect to have a house built, or a well dug, or a cotton factory established, by prayer. These belong to another domain. God has appointed that some things shall come by work. But when we need strength for work, when we need equanimity of mind, harmony within, peace and love in our soul, then, if we ask we shall receive, if we seek we shall find. This is the great fountain of spiritual life, ever open to us. God wishes us to come near to him for our good, not his. The essential thing in prayer is to feel the universal presence of love and of mind in nature, in life, in our soul, and to open thought and heart to be filled from this overflowing spring of inspiration.

How soon would the full perception of this principle put an end to the discussions about a probation hereafter, the doom of the heathen, and the condition of the impenitent! Christianity is for man, not man for Christianity. It comes to teach us that all souls belong to God, in time and eternity; that all men are his children; that he is the universal Father; that there is not an orphan child in the whole universe. Christ made himself the servant of all, and thus shows us that his Father and our Father,

the supreme and universal Being, is the comfort and help of every soul, in time and eternity. If we ascend into heaven, he is there; if we make our abode in hell, he is there, also. We often do make our abode in hell by our selfishness and sin. But God has not forgotten nor forsaken us. Whenever we will do so, we can pass out of hell into heaven.

Christianity was made for man, not man for Christianity. It came as the servant and blessed friend, to lift man's soul above the earth, to fill him with a heavenly hope, to make him feel that he is God's child. It came to say that this material universe, these heavens and this earth; nature, history, science, art, civilization,— have in them a heavenly meaning; that they are divine means to a heavenly end; that God is in them all as a blessed Father and Friend. Christianity comes to make life more pure and sweet, more true and generous; to make men and women more loyal to each other, more just and more noble. It comes, not merely to prepare us for another life but to fill this life full of a better happiness.

So to all earthly institutions we may apply this test of utility. They are all made for man, and all may be changed and removed when no longer useful. But there are some things above man,— not institutions, but everlasting realities. Truth, justice, love, purity,— these are eternal and above all. They were not made for man; but he was made for them. They belong to God's eternal nature: they do not change with our changing moods and opinions. They are like the star seen through the cloudy sky, which smiles out of heaven upon the storm-tossed mariner from its eternal home,

"Which looks on tempests and is never shaken."

But even the stars, which seem so fixed, are now found to be in motion. All outward things change, the whole material universe changes. It is a blessed thing that some things do not change, but remain as an anchor within the veil. Truth and goodness are real. Faith, hope, and love abide forever. So, though the forms and creeds of Christianity are altered from age to age, whatever is divine in Christ and his religion will be permanent, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Forms, methods, and ceremonies are made for man; but he himself is made for truth, for love, for eternity, and for God.

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P.O. Mission, The Church of the Disciples,

Corner West Brookline St. and Warren Avenue,

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